

Attorney General Bell

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is gaining some converts

WASHINGTON (AP) — Now that he's getting ready to leave the Cabinet, some of Attorney General Griffin Bell's former opponents in the Senate have changed their minds.

Bell faced more Senate opposition than any of Carter's other Cabinet choices. But after 2½ years on the job, he's won some converts.

Three of the senators who voted against his confirmation, George McGovern, Bob Dole and Richard Lugar, now say they made a mistake.

Bell has said he intends to resign soon and go home to Atlanta to practice law. No date has been set, but he has talked of leaving by late summer.

He still faces the criticism of some Republican senators for his handling of politically touchy cases, and his close ties to Carter — who once had said he would remove the attorney general's post from the political appointment process.

But Bell has gained support in Congress for the job he's done.

Some of the 21 senators who voted against Bell are also having second thoughts, and the controversy over his commitment to civil rights has virtually evaporated.

The flap was fueled by his membership in private Atlanta clubs that exclude blacks and his former service as an aide to a segregationist Georgia governor.

But once in office Bell pressed vigorously for appointment of black judges. The number of blacks on the federal bench will more than double if the Senate confirms all those selected by Carter and Bell.

Bell has converted both Republicans and Democrats to his side.

Dole, R-Kan., said, "I think we were, some of us, concerned about some of the civil rights aspects. But I think he's been even-handed and I've said to myself at times, that's probably one vote I'd like to have back."

McGovern, D-S.D., said, "Griffin Bell has, in my opinion, turned out to be a good attorney general. ... I think I made a mistake in opposing his nomination."

Lugar, R-Ind., said, "I think that Griffin Bell has done a good job. I have been impressed by the sincerity, the quiet, judicial manner he has brought to the job."

This is not so for Republicans Sens. Lowell Weicker, John Heinz and Harrison Schmitt. All said they still would still vote against Bell on grounds he is too close to the president.

They variously criticized his handling of the Marston affair and the Korean payoffs probe, and his initial reluctance to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate loans to Carter's family warehouse.